

## History of the Croatian Noncommissioned Officers Corps

First (1918 – 1941), and second Yugoslavia (1945 – 1991) represent the only period of time in Croatia's fourteen hundred years long history when Croatia did not have its own Armed Forces. Instead, Croats served in the Yugoslav People Army YPA (Jugoslavenska Narodna Armija JNA) as conscripts for a year at minimum since it was mandatory. Not many Croats became professional NCOs or Officers in YPA because it required membership in Yugoslav Communist Party YCP, and Croats traditionally were religious. As a result, at the beginning of Homeland War (1991 – 1995), Croats were not only poorly equipped, but also lacked professional chain of command. To organize an Army able to defend Croatia against Serbs and YPA, Croats had to take the model they were familiar with. That was the model of YPA.

Similar to the YPA, the Croatian Army had NCOs only at the positions of squad leaders. The exceptions were some MOSs where NCOs served as staff members, mostly as administrative NCOs. During the Homeland War, Croatian NCOs learned leadership skills by leading their squads on the battlefields and fighting shoulder to shoulder with their soldiers. The authority they had was the authority they earned on the battlefield, not the ranks, since most of them didn't even have the rank until 1992. The procedure was simple: it took you just a few days to show your comrades what you were made of. There was no higher command that directed who would take leadership position. The Croatian Army was born as an Army of volunteers and soldiers, and then chose the best among them to be their leaders. Confirmation from higher command was just a formality, and the promotion was a matter of time, depending on administration in the unit. If you had been lucky enough, and had a good administrative office to write a letter of recommendation, you could have gotten the highest NCO rank as your very first rank. The

reason for this was that nobody really cared about ranks at that time; the most important thing was freedom of our beloved Croatia and respect of the soldiers one gained. Not many of us knew that he or she was going to stay in the Army after the war as a professional soldier. However, NCOs played the crucial role in Homeland War. Leading their squads or sections, they were taking over the control of key terrain, roads, infrastructure, objects etc. It was the war where the heroism of small groups of soldiers was deciding victory in the battle. Croatian NCOs didn't fail.

Being better and better organized during the war, the Croatian Army realized the need for a good NCO education and development system. After several short leadership courses had been conducted in the cities of Varazdin and Zagreb, in the autumn of 1993 an NCO Academy was founded in the city of Jastrebarsko and hosted the first generation of BNCOC. Until 1995 and the arrival of the US experts team (Military Professional Resources Incorporated - The Democracy Transition Assistance Program MPRI-DTAP), the NCO Academy had been teaching old Yugoslav doctrine and tactics. The old Yugoslav doctrine manuals were the only ones that NCO Academy had at its disposal. This had advantages and disadvantages. The bad thing was that this doctrine, which was basically the same as the Soviet Army doctrine, was old and proved as unsuccessful. The good thing was that we knew the way the enemy fought and were able to surprise our enemy on the battlefield.

The MPRI-DTAP team conducted numerous courses in different Croatian units. The focus of these courses was on transformation of Croatian NCO corps from the old one, based on ex-Yugoslav Army system, to the new one, compatible with NATO and the best Army in the world -- the US Army. The Croatian government and Croatian Army realized that not everything found in US Army FMs, ARTEPs, ARs etc. was applicable in Croatia simply because the

difference between the two armies in equipment used, resource availability and National Strategies. Nevertheless, leadership doctrine, NCO corps, training management and many other things were easily adopted in the Croatian Army. After MPRI-DTAP team conducted several courses at the NCO Academy, the General Staff of Croatian Armed Forces selected 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade – Tigers as the first unit to implement and test feasibility of NCO corps in the Croatian Army.

In 1997, the best NCOs were selected for new positions and duties. Commanders selected the best NCOs in their units and they became platoon sergeants, company or battery first sergeants, staff NCOs, battalion sergeant majors etc. The requirements for selection depended on the commanders and sometimes varied from unit to unit, but usually included: participation in war and combat experience, NCO evaluation report, civilian and military education, military appearance and physical fitness. However, these positions remained experimental until 1999, and the official NCO assignments were still squad leaders. Soon after inspections in 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade showed improvement in battle readiness, and especially interest that brigade's NCOs and officers showed for the new system, other Croatian units followed the 1<sup>st</sup> Bde. Official reorganization of the Croatian Army took place in October 1999, but only in 1<sup>st</sup> Guards Bde, 7<sup>th</sup> Guards Bde, and NCO Academy. Lack of finance caused delay in reorganization of the whole Army. The official regulations concerning service in the Armed Forces remain unchanged, causing problems with salaries for NCOs that assumed higher positions. Having special allowances for being in the chain of command, squad leaders have better salaries than platoon sergeants or NCOs in higher positions. The Croatian Army will not solve this problem until March 2003 with finishing reorganization of complete Armed Forces.

MPRI-DTAP team takes credentials for transforming not only the Croatian NCO corps in the units, but also the NCO Education System (NCOES). In December 1998, the Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course (ANCOC) Class I graduated from the Croatian NCO Academy. In October 2002, the Croatian Sergeants Major Academy Class I has started and will graduate in May 2003.

The reorganization of the Croatian Armed Forces and NCOES represents crucial step forward in accomplishing the goal of the Croatian government -- to become a member of NATO. In the future, Croatian NCOs will be well trained, equipped, highly motivated, and able to participate in peacekeeping operations all around the world.

Even though the Croatian Noncommissioned Officers Corps is relatively young, existing officially for only three years, it has progressed drastically. It will continue to develop in accordance to NATO standards, using the senior NCOs that have finished US Army NCO schools as primary instructors. This is the biggest advantage that the Croatian Armed Forces have, young, but well trained NCOs with combat experiences.

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